

Footage shows police pointing assault rifles at child detainees in Australia

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1 February 2019

Last month, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) released previously suppressed CCTV footage documenting the aggressive response of guards and police officers to a disturbance at the Northern Territory's Don Dale Juvenile Detention Centre last November. The video shows Territory Response Group (TRG) police, dressed in military fatigues, aiming assault rifles at unarmed youth detainees as they surrendered.

The disturbance, labelled a "riot" by the media and government authorities, began when two youth snatched a key from a prison guard and unlocked the cells of other inmates. Some detainees climbed onto building rooftops, while others attempted to escape the facility.

The Territory (NT) Labor government immediately blamed the detainees for the resulting police violence. Deputy Chief Minister Nicole Manison declared: "What we saw happen last night at Don Dale was unacceptable. There is absolutely no excuse for attacking a worker within the centre to get keys and then to go out and participate in the sort of acts that we saw."

At the time, media outlets referred to the TRG's arrival during the incident. The extent of its involvement, however, was unclear. The footage showed TRG officers storming the prison with a military-grade armoured vehicle and pointing assault rifles at detainees who had their arms raised above their head.

The footage provoked widespread shock. The scene resembled an aggressive military operation. The TRG officers were virtually indistinguishable from special forces soldiers engaged in the neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, Labor's NT Chief Minister Michael

Gunner backed the TRG, telling the ABC, "they regularly respond to situations across the Northern Territory, they know what they're doing and I have confidence in NT Police."

The TRG is the NT Police Tactical Group, which was created as part of a broader development of paramilitary police units nationally under the banner of the "war on terror."

Each year, the TRG trains with the Australian military. It receives military-style weapons, including the Lenco BearCat armoured vehicle used at Don Dale. The BearCat is capable of shooting tear gas into crowds and comes with a turret to which machine guns can be attached.

The aggressive intervention of the TRG is only the latest in a series of abuses meted out to Don Dale detainees.

In August 2014, tear gas was used during a disturbance at the facility. The authorities claimed it was necessary because detainees had escaped their cells and were staging a "riot."

A 2016 ABC "Four Corners" episode published CCTV footage that exposed the official story as a lie. It showed one detainee, Jake Roper, getting out of his cell after a guard failed to lock it. The six youth most heavily hit with the tear gas were in their cells. Some were quietly playing cards.

This program revealed the routine brutalisation of the children detained at Don Dale. One inmate, Dylan Voller, was shown being attacked by multiple guards on more than one occasion. Voller also was placed in a hooded "restraint chair," similar to devices used in the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Like today's Labor government, the then Country Liberal NT government defended the violence. To head off a public outcry, it then joined the federal Liberal-

National government in calling a royal commission.

Testimony subsequently revealed abuses at the facility dating back to at least 2010. The inquiry, however, was always intended to be a whitewash, aimed at covering-up the responsibility of successive Labor and Country Liberal Party governments and diverting the outrage behind promises of “prison reform.”

The reality is that Labor’s NT government, which has been in office since August 2016, has failed to shut Don Dale, despite numerous promises. A decommissioned adult prison, lacking basic amenities, the facility has been deemed unfit for human habitation by United Nations bodies and other rights organisations.

The overwhelming majority of the youth held in the centre have not been convicted of serious crimes. Most are on remand.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that in 2016 and 2017, 77 percent of all NT youth detainees, who are aged between 10 and 17, were waiting for their trial or for sentencing.

Figures from the NT’s Department of the Attorney General and Justice revealed that in 2015 and 2016, 29 percent of incarcerated youth who had been convicted of a crime had been found guilty of “unlawful entry with intent/burglary, break and enter.”

These are crimes of poverty and oppression, stemming from the social conditions inflicted upon an entire generation of young people. At least 94 percent of all youth detained in the NT are Aboriginal. The indigenous population is the most oppressed section of the working class, suffering astronomical levels of unemployment and poverty, but the issue is a wider one.

The social crisis facing all workers and young people is intensifying, as a result of government cuts to essential services and the gutting of jobs, wages and conditions by successive governments, assisted by the trade unions.

The Australian Council of Social Services has documented a sharp rise in rates of child poverty across the country. In 2012, 575,000 minors were living below the poverty line. In 2018, the figure was 739,000.

Official figures indicated that 12 percent of 15–24 year-olds nationwide were unemployed in 2018, while 18 percent of youth aged 15–19 were jobless. In some

working-class areas, real rates of youth unemployment are over 40 percent, while many young workers receive poverty-line wages in precarious, casual labour.

The political establishment has responded to the social crisis by turning to repression and by building up the state apparatus. Youth detention rates are rising across the country. In the NT, the average number of youth incarcerated rose from 18 per day in 2005–06 to 48 in 2015–16.

Numerous cases of abuse have been documented. In 2016, the Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews responded to clashes between youth and officers at a detention facility by transferring 40 teenagers to a maximum-security adult prison. A court later deemed the move unlawful.

The brutal attacks on juvenile prisoners are part of a build-up of police and military forces aimed at preparing for mass repression against the emerging social and political struggles of workers and young people amid ever-widening social inequality, austerity, authoritarianism and war.



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